

CH'AN NEWS LETTER

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This is Part One of a translation of an article written by the modern patriarch Master Hsu-yun (1839-1959), who is also known by his English name, Empty Cloud.

**LEVEL
ONE**

The Essentials of Ch'an Practice

by Master Hsu-yun

THE PREREQUISITES AND UNDERSTANDING NECESSARY TO BEGIN CH'AN PRACTICE

1. The Objective of Ch'an Practice:

The objective of Ch'an practice is to illuminate the mind by eradicating its impurities and seeing into one's true self-nature. The mind's impurities are wrong thoughts and attachments. Self-nature is the wisdom and virtue of the Tathagata. The wisdom and virtue of Buddhas and sentient beings are not different from one another. To experience this wisdom and virtue, leave behind duality, discrimination, wrong thinking and attachment. This is Buddhahood. If one cannot do this, then one remains an ordinary sentient being.

It is because you and I are defiled that we have been wandering lost and confused through Samsara for limitless kalpas; and that we cannot immediately cast off wrong thinking and see our original nature. For this reason we must practice Ch'an.

The prerequisite for Ch'an practice is to eradicate wrong thinking. Sakyamuni Buddha taught much on this subject. His simplest and most direct teaching is the word "stop" from the expression "stopping is Bodhi." From the time when Bodhidharma transmitted Ch'an teachings to today, the winds of Ch'an have blown far and wide, shaking and illuminating the world. Among the many things that Bodhidharma and the Sixth Patriarch taught to those who came to study with them, none is more valuable than the saying, "Put down all entangling conditions, let not one thought arise."

This expression is truly the prerequisite for the practice of Ch'an. If you cannot fulfill this requirement, then not only will you fail to attain the ultimate goal of Ch'an practice, but you will not even be able to enter the door of Ch'an. How can you talk of practicing Ch'an if you are entangled by worldly phenomena with thought after thought arising and passing away?

2. Put Down All Entangling Conditions:

"Put down all entangling conditions, let not one thought arise" is a prerequisite for the practice of Ch'an. Now that we know this, how do we accomplish it? The best practitioner, one of superior abilities, can stop all thoughts forever, arrive directly at the condition of non-arising, and instantly experience Bodhi. Such a person is not entangled by anything.

The next best kind of practitioner uses principle to cut off phenomena and realizes that self-nature is originally pure. Vexation and Bodhi, Samsara and Nirvana — all are false names which have nothing to do with one's self-nature. All things are dreams and illusions, like bubbles or reflections.

Within self-nature, my body, made up of the four great elements, as well as the mountains, rivers and great earth itself are like bubbles in the sea, arising and disappearing, yet never obstructing the original surface. Do not be captivated by the arising, abiding, changing and passing away of illusory phenomena, which give rise to pleasure and aversion, grasping and rejecting. Give up your whole body, as if you were dead, and the six sense organs, the six sense objects and the six sense consciousnesses will naturally disperse. Greed, hatred, ignorance and love will be destroyed. All the sensations of pain, suffering and pleasure which attend the body — hunger, cold, satiation, warmth, glory, insult, birth and death, calamity, prosperity, good and bad luck, praise, blame, gain and loss, safety and danger — will no longer be your concern. Only this can be considered true renunciation — when you put everything down forever. This is what is meant by renouncing all phenomena.

When all phenomena are renounced, wrong thoughts disappear, discrimination does not arise, and attachment is left behind. When thoughts no longer arise, the brightness of self-nature manifests itself completely. At this time you will have fulfilled the

necessary conditions for Ch'an practice. Then, further hard work and sincere practice will enable you to illuminate the mind and see into your true nature.

3. Everyone Can Instantly Become a Buddha:

Many Ch'an practitioners ask questions about the Dharma. The Dharma that is spoken is not the true Dharma. As soon as you try to explain things, the true meaning is lost. When you realize that "one mind" is the Buddha, from that point on there is nothing more to do. Everything is already complete. All talk about practice or attainment is demonic deception.

Bodhidharma's "Direct pointing at the mind, seeing into one's nature and attaining Buddhahood" clearly instructs that all sentient beings are Buddhas. Once pure self-nature is recognized, one can harmonize with the environment yet remain undefiled. The mind will remain unified throughout the day, whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down. This is to already be a Buddha. At this point there is no need to put forth effort and be diligent. Any action is superfluous. No need to bother with the slightest thought or word. Therefore, to become a Buddha is the easiest, most unobstructed task. Do it by yourself. Do not seek outside yourself for it.

All sentient beings — who wish to avoid rebirth for eternal kalpas in the four forms of birth and the six paths of existence; who eternally sink in the sea of suffering; and who vow to attain Buddhahood and the four virtues of Nirvana (eternity, joy, self, purity) — can immediately attain Buddhahood if they wholly believe in the sincere words of the Buddha and the patriarchs, renounce everything, and think neither of good nor evil. The vow to deliver all sentient beings, made by all the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and patriarchs, is not a boast nor is it a baseless, empty vow.

The Dharma is exactly that. It has been elucidated again and again by the Buddha and the patriarchs.

They have exhorted us with the truth. They do not deceive us. Unfortunately, sentient beings are confused and for limitless kalpas they have experienced birth and death in the sea of suffering, appearing and disappearing, endlessly taking on new forms of life. Dazed and confused, entangled in the worldly dust of the six senses with their backs to enlightenment, they are like pure gold in a cesspool. Because of the severity of the problem, Buddha compassionately taught 84,000 Dharma doors to accord with the varying karmic roots of sentient beings, so that sentient beings may use the methods to cure themselves of 84,000 habits and faults, which include greed, hatred, ignorance and desire.

4. Investigating Ch'an and Contemplating Mind:

Our sect focuses on investigating Ch'an. The purpose of practicing Ch'an is to "Illuminate the mind and see into one's true nature." This investigation is also called "Clearly realizing one's self-mind and completely perceiving one's original nature."

Since the time when Buddha held up a flower and Bodhidharma came to the East, the methods for entry into this Dharma door have continually evolved. Most Ch'an practitioners, before the T'ang and Sung dynasties, became enlightened after hearing a word or half a sentence of the Dharma. The transmission from master to disciple was the sealing of Mind with Mind. There was no fixed Dharma. Everyday questions and answers only untied the bonds. It was nothing more than prescribing the right medicine for the right illness.

After the Sung dynasty, however, people did not have such good karmic roots as their predecessors. They could not carry out what had been said. For example, practitioners were taught to "Put down everything" and "Not think about good and evil," but they could not do it. They could not put down everything, and if they weren't thinking about good, they were thinking about evil. Under these circumstances, the patriarchs had no choice but to use

poison to fight poison, so they taught the method of investigating *kung-ans* [and *hua-t'ous*].

When one begins looking into a *hua-t'ou*, one must grasp it tightly, never letting go. It is like a mouse trying to chew its way out of a coffin. It concentrates on one point. It doesn't try different places and it doesn't stop until it gets through. Thus, in terms of *hua-t'ou*, the objective is to use one thought to eradicate innumerable other thoughts. This method is a last resort, just as if someone had been pierced by a poison arrow. Drastic measures must be taken to cure the patient.

The ancients used *kung-ans*, but later on practitioners started using *hua-t'ou*. Some *hua-tou's* are: "Who is dragging this corpse around?" "Before you were born what was your original face?" and, "Who is reciting Buddha's name?"

In fact, all *hua-tou's* are the same. There is nothing uncommon, strange, or special about them. If you wanted to, you could say: "Who is reciting the sutras?" "Who is reciting the mantras?" "Who is prostrating to the Buddha?" "Who is eating?" "Who is wearing these clothes?" "Who's walking?" "Who's sleeping?" They are all the same. The answer to the question "who" is derived from one's Mind. Mind is the origin of all words. Thoughts come out of Mind; Mind is the origin of all thoughts. Innumerable dharmas generate from the Mind; Mind is the origin of all dharmas. In fact, *hua-t'ou* is a thought. Before a thought arises, that is Mind. Before a thought arises, there is the origin of words. Hence, looking into a *hua-t'ou* is contemplating Mind. There was Mind before your parents gave birth to you, so looking into your original face before you were born is contemplating Mind.

Self-nature is Mind. When one turns inward to hear one's self-nature, one is turning inward to contemplate Mind. In the phrase, "Perfectly illuminating pure awareness," pure awareness is Mind and illumination is contemplation. Mind is Buddha. When one

recites Buddha's name one contemplates Buddha. Contemplating Buddha is contemplating Mind.

Investigating *hua-t'ou* or "looking into who is reciting Buddha's name" is contemplating Mind. Hence, contemplating Mind is illuminating pure awareness. It is also illuminating the Buddha-nature within oneself. Mind is nature, pure awareness, Buddha. Mind has no form, no characters, no directions; it cannot be found in any particular place. It cannot be grasped. Originally, Mind is purity, universally embracing all Dharma realms. No in or out, no coming or going. Originally, Mind is pure Dharmakaya.

When investigating *hua-t'ou*, the practitioner should first close down all six sense organs and seek where thoughts arise. Practitioners should concentrate on the *hua-t'ou* until they see the pure original mind which is apart from thoughts. If one does this without interruption, the mind becomes fine, quiet tranquil, silently illuminating. At that moment the five skandhas are empty, body and mind are extinguished, nothing remains. From that point, walking, standing, sitting and lying down are all done motionlessly. In time the practice will deepen, and eventually practitioners will see their self-nature and become Buddhas and suffering will cease.

A past patriarch named Kao-feng (1238-1295) once said: "You must contemplate *hua-t'ou* like a falling roof tile sinking endlessly down into a pond ten thousand feet deep. If in seven days you are not enlightened, I will give you permission to chop off my head." These are the words of an experienced person. He did not speak lightly. His words are true.

Although many modern day practitioners use *hua-t'ou*, few get enlightened. This is because compared to practitioners of the past, practitioners today have inferior karmic roots and less merit. Also, practitioners today are not clear about the purpose and path of *hua-t'ou*. Some practitioners search from east to west and north to south until they die, but still do

not penetrate even one *hua-t'ou*. They never understand or correctly approach the *hua-t'ou*. They only grasp the form and the words. They use their intellect and attach only to the tail of the words.

Hua-t'ou is One Mind. This mind is not inside, outside, or in the middle. On the other hand, it is inside, outside, and in the middle. It is like the stillness of empty space prevailing everywhere.

Hua-t'ou should not be picked up. Neither should it be pressed down. If you pick it up, your mind will waver and become unstable. If you press it down you will become drowsy. These approaches are contrary to the nature of the original mind and are not in accordance with the Middle Path.

Practitioners are distressed by wandering thoughts. They think it is difficult to tame them. Don't be afraid of wandering thoughts. Do not waste your energy trying to repress them. All you have to do is recognize them. Do not attach to wandering thoughts, do not follow them, and do not try to get rid of them. As long as you don't string thoughts together, wandering thoughts will depart by themselves.

to be continued

Dharma Drum Mountain

You may have heard of Dharma Drum Publications, the publisher of Master Sheng-yen's (Shih-fu's) six English books, Ch'an Magazine and Ch'an Newsletter, but do you know about Dharma Drum Mountain?

Master Sheng-yen searched for a site in Taiwan to expand the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies and the Nung Ch'an Monastery. In April of 1989 approximately 80 acres of land in the Gold Mountain district of Taipei were purchased. This land and Shih-fu's vision of what it will become has been named Dharma Drum Mountain.

A great future lies before Dharma Drum Mountain. There will be a Main Hall to seat 3000 people and a Ch'an Hall designed in the old Ch'an style, capable of housing and feeding 300 practitioners. The complex will include offices; classrooms; a dormitory for faculty, students, monks, nuns and staff; a library of 160,000 books; an international conference room with simultaneous translation available; and a facility for solitary retreats.

The objective of Dharma Drum Mountain is to spread Buddhadharma in a way that can benefit every individual, family, society, culture and country in the world; to help people realize and experience the peace, tranquillity and health that is possible in the pure world within and around us. We hope that each member of Dharma Drum Mountain will be a drummer who will spread the right view of Buddhadharma throughout the land. This will improve the mental and physical health of all who heed its call, and it will create a positive influence on society and the world. In this way more and more people will be able to benefit from the Three Jewels and live in the light of wisdom and compassion.

A Buddhist on the Bodhisattva Path passes through three levels. First there is faith in the teachings of the Buddha and the cultivation of good deeds. Second is the realization that *dana* (virtue of giving and generosity) is most meritorious. Third and highest is liberation of the self; doing good deeds without seeking reward; not seeking fame or power; giving without needing to receive. At Dharma Drum Mountain, Master Sheng-yen hopes to create an environment of World Buddhism, where differences between sects, races and cultures are downplayed and the "Right Knowledge and Right View" of Buddhism is emphasized.

News Items

Shih-fu's travels:

Shih-fu organized a "Dharma Drum Chung-Hwa Buddhist Engineering Research Group" to design and oversee the construction of the Dharma Drum Mountain's temple and buildings. The research group went to mainland China on April 10, 1991 and for three weeks visited temples in order to study ancient Buddhist architecture and esthetics. The plan for Dharma Drum Mountain is to blend the architecture and style of ancient temples with some of today's modern style and technology. In all, the group visited thirty sites, including the famous Tun-huang Caves and temples around Wu-Tai Mountain in Da Tong. They then went to Tibet.

Shih-fu was invited by Dr. David Chappell to lecture at the University of Honolulu in Hawaii on May 2. The topic was, "Recent Trends in Chinese Buddhism and Buddhist Practice in Today's Society." Over 200 people attended.

On May 5 Shih-fu lectured at the Karma Dzong Zen Center in Boulder, Colorado. The topic was "Ch'an and the View of Self."

On May 6 Shih-fu lectured at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver. The talk was coordinated by Dr. Jose Ignacio Cabezon, and the topic was "Meditation Practice and Buddha-nature."

During the evening of May 6, Shih-fu participated in a question and answer discussion with Dr. Tung Ming Lai on the subject of Buddhism.

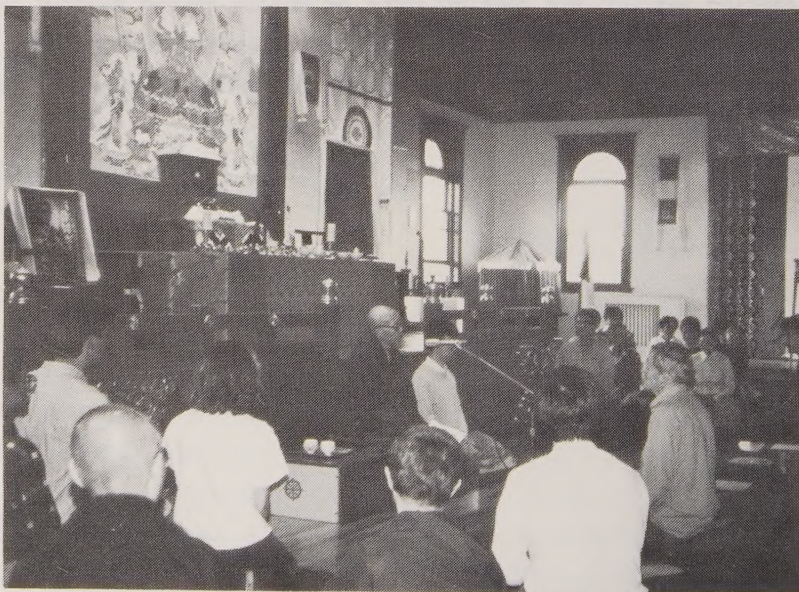
In New York:

On May 11, Guo Yuan Shih, Tim Ide and Jeffery Kung attended the Vesak Celebration organized by the Buddhist Council of New York.

On May 19 the Ch'an Center celebrated Buddha's Birthday. Approximately 500



Prof Chappell, Shih-fu, Prof. Lo



Shih-fu lecturing at Karma Dzong Zen Center, Colorado

people attended. Master Jen-chen gave a short discourse in the morning and Shih-fu gave a short talk in the afternoon. There was also a vegetarian feast, a gift exchange, and entertainment put on by children singing and telling stories in Chinese and English.

That evening about 30 members of the Ch'an Center participated in the United Dharma Congregation and Lotus Lantern Parade in New York. This event was organized by the Federation of Korean Buddhists.

Shih-fu conducted the 52nd intensive Ch'an retreat at the Ch'an Center from May 24 through June 1. Thirty-three people participated.



Buddha's Birthday Celebration

On June 8 Shih-fu gave a talk for the first time in over ten years in Chinatown, Manhattan. Approximately 500 people attended, including over 30 monks and nuns. The talk, which concerned Buddhism's parallels and differences with other world religions, was given in Mandarin and Cantonese. The Center gave away 1,000 of Shih-fu's Chinese books.

On June 9 Guo Yuan Shih attended an Interfaith Memorial Service for those who died in the Persian Gulf War. This service was at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Up-coming events:

The 53rd retreat at the Ch'an Center is scheduled from June 28 through July 6.

The Ch'an Center's annual membership meeting will be on Sunday, July 7, at 9:30 a.m.

Shih-fu will be returning to Taiwan on July 8.

While Shih-fu is away, Reverend Jen-chen and Professor Li will speak during Sunday open house activities.



Attendents at June 8 lecture

Up-coming Activities:

MEDITATION

Three-day Retreat – August 31, 8 a.m. to September 2, 8 p.m. *\$30 for member, \$45 for non-member*

One-day Retreats – Saturday July 13, August 3 and September 14 from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. *\$10 for member, \$15 for non-member*

One-day Beginner's Meditation Class – Saturday July 20, August 24 and September 28 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. *\$50*

Group Meditation – Weekday evenings from 7:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., Sunday 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. *Free of charge*

RECITATION

One-day Recitation of Buddha's Name – Saturday August 10 and September 21 from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
Lunch donation \$ 3.00

One-day Recitation of the Ksitigarbharaja Bodhisattva Sutra – Saturday September 7 from 9:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Please call to register (718) 592-6593.

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